

A BRIEF GUIDE TO ROMAN CATHOLICISM TODAY

by Alan Howe (UK)

howe.999@btinternet.com

There is in Protestant evangelical circles a commonly held misconception concerning the Roman Catholic Church today: namely, that we are dealing with broadly the same institution and theology with which our forebears dealt. So, for example, one recently published and generally helpful pamphlet speaks of the current pope, Benedict XVI (formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger), as an 'arch-conservative' and mentions his 'pre-Vatican II doctrinal rigidity', thus giving the unmistakable impression that little, if anything has changed in the official stance of the church over the past fifty years or more. In order, therefore, to come to a more accurate representation of Rome's official stance theologically today, we need first to understand what has happened in the past century or so, i.e. not only in the period leading up to the convening of the Second Vatican Council ('Vatican II': October 1962-December 1965), but also in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Roman Catholic Theology before Vatican II

Prior to Vatican II the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church was 'Neo-Thomism', or more broadly 'Neo-Scholasticism', which began to be established from about 1840 in order to rescue the church from an increasing pluralism of ideas and theologies in the early nineteenth century. Neo-Thomism in particular was the movement designed to recover the theology of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) as central to the church; it was given official sanction in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of 1879. Thus when Protestants think of Roman Catholicism, they may have in mind the overall picture given by an author such as Loraine Boettner in his classic volume *Roman Catholicism* (P & R, 1962), published during the Second Vatican Council, but describing the theology which had prevailed up to that point. This was a theology which was officially Neo-Thomist and Tridentine (i.e. also upholding the declarations of the Council of Trent [1545-63] which condemned the Protestant Reformation).

Not that liberal ideas in various forms did not circulate within the church between 1879 and 1962. Pope Pius X, in his decree *Lamentabili* and encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (both issued in 1907), condemned modernism, describing it (in *Pascendi*) as the 'synthesis of all heresies'. Modernist Roman Catholic thinkers such as Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925), Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), George Tyrrell (1861-1909) and Maurice Blondel (1861-1949) thus became the object of official scorn and rejection. However, modernist seeds had been sown; and in the background stood the figure of Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890), an Anglican convert to Rome (1845) who wrote what was to become for many later, liberalising theologians at the time of Vatican II a key text: *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. This work was written by Newman as a vehicle to justify the theological developments found in the traditional Roman Catholicism of his day but rejected by Protestantism (e.g. Mariology). However, as Nick Needham has argued, 'it is to be feared that the ultimate thrust of Newman's philosophy of development may have been to bolster the Hegelian evolutionary idea of God and

the world which increasingly seems to underlie much modern Roman Catholic thinking' (essay: The Tragic Enigma of John Henry Newman - CRN Journal, Spring 2001). In other words, Newman's ideas were eventually to give succour to those who sought to reject the rigidity of Neo-Thomism and instead promote modernist thinking. Even the papal condemnations of 1907 and the entrenchment of Neo-Thomism as central to official theological training by the 1920s did not, however, entirely halt the spread of modernist ideas. Theologians such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), Karl Rahner (1904-1984), Yves Congar (1904-95) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-88) began to grapple with the same sorts of ideas which had been condemned in the early twentieth century. This gave rise, for example, to the broad school of thought known as 'Nouvelle Théologie' ('New Theology') which rejected the official theology of the church. This move to free the church from what was seen as the straitjacket of Neo-Thomist orthodoxy was also met with official criticism in the encyclical *Humani generis* of Pope Pius XII, issued in 1950. However, as Reformed theologian David F. Wells narrates, this encyclical 'was so mild in its wording it can hardly even be seen as a rebuke. The work of the new theologians was not imperilled and still less consigned to the graveyard of heresy. After a further decade of study, their conclusions seemed sufficiently safe and fruitful to be given papal approval' (essay: *Recent Roman Catholic Theology in Tensions in Contemporary Theology* - Moody Press, 1976). So how could this be? What was the event that precipitated the sea-change in Roman Catholicism which would finally admit the New Theology (i.e. modernism)?

Vatican II and aggiornamento

On October 28th 1958 one Angelo Giuseppe Rocalli was elected pope, taking the name John XXIII. Unlike his predecessor Pius XII, the new pope - although already an old man - was open to the modernising agenda of the New Theology. Thus John XXIII summoned the Second Vatican Council with the specific intention not of merely repeating what had been taught in the past, but rather of achieving a doctrinal breakthrough. As he made clear in his address which inaugurated the Council, his justification was that the 'substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another'. For a church in second half of the twentieth century it wasn't sufficient to stand still: it was necessary to embark upon a radical process of *aggiornamento* (bringing things up to date).

The result at Vatican II was a clash of theologies and their representatives, with the Neo-Thomist traditionalists being battled by the newly emboldened modernisers of the New Theology. As David Wells narrates, when the two parties came into conflict with each other, three outcomes were possible: on rare occasions one side prevailed; sometimes, when neither side backed down, a reconciling statement was drawn up which was ambiguous enough to mean different things to the two parties; and sometimes no such reconciling statement could be devised, in which case the two opposing positions were simply recorded alongside each other. The problem, then, that was bequeathed to the Roman Catholic Church was a set of Council documents which could often be interpreted in varying ways. Rather than resulting in clarity, what Vatican II often did was to produce uncertainty. So what is the situation today, nearly half a century later?

Rome today: three camps, not two!

Today Roman Catholics themselves are clear that in the wake of Vatican II three broad doctrinal camps have evolved. Philip Trower, in *Turmoil and Truth* (Family Publications/Ignatius Press, 2003), writes:

'Among those calling themselves Catholics today there are in fact not two but three recognisable bodies of belief or opinion. First, there are Catholics in the hitherto universally recognised sense; they accept all the Church's teachings. Then come the modernists or semi-modernists dedicated to altering some aspect of faith or morals. We can also call them innovators or dissenters. It seems the politest name consistent with accuracy. Finally, there are the followers of the French Archbishop, Marcel Lefebvre.' (p.37)

Re-stating and re-ordering Trower's analysis for the sake of clarity, we can characterise the three camps as follows:

1. The Traditionalists: As Trower says, the Neo-Thomist followers of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905-91) make up this camp. They are basically those who have rejected Vatican II as heretical and wish to maintain the doctrines and practices of Rome prior to the Council. Lefebvre founded the Society of St Pius XII in 1970 and in 1988, after himself consecrating four bishops in defiance of Pope John Paul II, was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. This group is small, although vocal.

There are also a number of (mainly) American Roman Catholic apologists who, although working within the church, are concerned to promote traditional Tridentine teaching. Typical examples here would be ex-Presbyterian (PCA) Scott Hahn, or Karl Keating.

2. The Radical Liberals (i.e Trower's modernists or semi-modernists): These are the thinkers and theologians who wish to carry forward the most radical interpretation of Vatican II. They too often act in defiance of the reigning orthodoxy. A representative figure would be theologian Hans Küng (b.1928) who was appointed a peritus, or official theological advisor at Vatican II. Although still a priest in good standing today, he was deprived of his mandate to teach Roman Catholic theology in 1979, mainly as a result of his explicit rejection of papal infallibility. The representative journal of this camp is *Concilium* which puts forward a more radical version of the New Theology.

3. The Conservative Liberals (i.e. those in Trower's analysis who accept Rome's teachings): These are the representatives today of a more conservative interpretation of the New Theology, e.g. Joseph Ratzinger (b.1927), the current pope. The theology of the more conservative liberals is now the prevailing orthodoxy within Roman Catholicism. Their textbook is the officially-sanctioned *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (first published in English in 1994) and their representative journal is *Communio*.

The outworking of Vatican II in the doctrine of soteriology

Roman Catholicism is therefore no more monolithic in its doctrine and practice than wider Protestantism. Of course, there is an official line as represented by the Catechism and various papal pronouncements; however, there is usually also visible dissent at both ends of the theological spectrum, i.e. from the traditionalists and from the radical liberals. One thing is clear, though: if there is an official line, it is not going to be that of the church pre-Vatican II. The official line must therefore be characterised as liberal in some measure. We can see this in the doctrine of soteriology:

The traditionalists, like orthodox evangelicals, are exclusivists, i.e. they teach that there is no salvation outside the Christian faith, in particular as represented by the Roman Catholic Church. This is summarised in the Latin phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (there is no salvation outside the church). Pope Pius X in his encyclical *Jucunda sane* of 1904 explained this teaching as follows:

'It is our duty to recall to everyone great and small, as the Holy Pontiff Gregory did in ages past, the absolute necessity which is ours, to have recourse to this Church to effect our eternal salvation.'

Evangelicals have also traditionally been exclusivists, arguing, however, that Rome is a false church. Biblical texts such as John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 provide the main arguments for Christian exclusivism.

The radical liberals, like many liberal Protestants, are often pluralists, i.e. they teach that all religions can lead to God and salvation. This is the position of Roman Catholic theologian Paul Knitter, editor (with Protestant theologian of soteriological pluralism, John Hick) of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Orbis, 1987). In this teaching Jesus Christ is no longer held to be the only saviour, thus contradicting the biblical texts mentioned above.

The conservative liberals, like many other liberal Protestants and some liberal-leaning evangelicals such as Clark Pinnock, are inclusivists, i.e. they teach that people of other religions can be saved by Jesus Christ even if they do not explicitly believe in him. Karl Rahner coined the term 'anonymous Christians' to describe people who are saved in this way.

Inclusivism is in fact the official position of Rome today. This shift away from the traditionally-held exclusivism began with the declarations of Vatican II (e.g. *Lumen Gentium*) and is now enshrined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

" 'Those who have not yet received the gospel are related to the People of God in various ways' (para.839) " 'The Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God's revelation in the Old Covenant.' (para.839)

" 'The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day.' (para.841)

" 'The Church's bond with non-Christian religions is in the first place the common origin and end of the human race...all share a common destiny, namely God...' (para.842)

" 'The Catholic Church recognises in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since he gives life and breath and all things, and wants all men to be saved.' (para.843)

" '...all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his body.' (para. 846)

" 'Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by his grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - those too may achieve eternal salvation.' (para.847)

It is evident, therefore, the Roman Catholic Church has dramatically shifted her position on the doctrine of salvation. In reality she teaches today that people of any faith (or, perhaps, none) can be saved by means of religious sincerity, because this is in effect anonymous Christianity. Inclusivism has therefore replaced exclusivism. Ian Ker, Roman Catholic priest and biographer of John Henry Newman, explains the current orthodoxy as follows:

'...the Council (i.e. Vatican II) reasserted the Catholic Church's rejection of both the narrowness and exclusivity of the Evangelical Protestantism which restricts salvation to Christian believers, as well as any kind of Liberal protestant approach which undermines the uniqueness of Christ as the sole mediator.' (Catholic Herald, 15th September 2000)

Of course, while describing Rome's official position today perfectly accurately, Ker is actually re-writing the history of his own church whose position prior to Vatican II was patently exclusivist (with the exception of the doctrine of Baptism of Desire, which taught that the unbaptised could be saved if they desired baptism but died before receiving it).

Knowing our enemy

This writer is convinced that one of the reasons why evangelicals often continue to engage purely with the doctrinal controversies of the past (giving the impression that Rome has not

changed) may well be that this is within their theological comfort-zone. However, while such engagement is still necessary in those theological loci which divide orthodox evangelicals from Roman Catholic traditionalists just as they did in the sixteenth century, it is important to understand that the debate has actually been relocated and now takes place in a quite different overall theological context. As Reformed theologian Robert Strimple says with regard to the traditionalist Roman Catholic apologists in the USA:

'Evangelical Protestants must recognise, however, what such conservative Roman Catholics themselves recognise: that they form the "orthodox minority" (Keating) in the Catholic Church. And when orthodox Protestants enter into debate with those who now form the majority of professional Catholic theologians, the issues addressed must be the even more radically fundamental ones relating to the meaning of every affirmation of the historic faith of the Christian church...' (essay: Roman Catholic Theology Today in Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze what Divides and Unites us - ed. John H. Armstrong, Moody Press, 1994)

Let us, therefore, know our enemy, so to speak. The Roman Catholic Church has changed fundamentally in the past half-century, from a Tridentine exclusivist body ("no salvation outside the church") to one that embraces religious inclusivism ("all can be saved by their own sincere religious quest"). In our engagement with Rome's teachings, let us therefore not merely re-fight the battles of the past, but so understand what Rome in fact teaches that we may be equipped to fight the battles of today.